**Dismantling Barriers**

Here are the initial results of Through the Roof's research project into disabled people's experience of church:

**Section A: What positive benefits does your disability add to your relationship with God?**

The "worried well" often see disability as an unmitigated disaster. But we know that most disabled people do not see it in this way. One of the reasons why a poster campaign by a well-known healing evangelist gave great offence to the disabled community in London some years ago was because of its implication that there is "something wrong" with disabled people. At Through the Roof we acknowledge that God still heals bodies today, and we give Him praise whenever He does so. But we are also aware that many people with their impairments experience a depth of inner healing that goes beyond what many abled people experience. Sadly, the message disabled people have heard from the church has often been, "We want God to change you", and this carries the implication, "You're not acceptable as you are".

So we decided to ask people about the positive aspects of their disability, and in particular, its positive impact on their relationship with God. Many of the responses revealed a depth of relationship with God and a wealth of rich spirituality that would certainly qualify these people for leadership roles. This leads us to wonder why so few disabled people do, in fact, occupy leadership or ministry roles within our churches. One Christian speaker noted that, since becoming a wheelchair user, she has received far fewer invitations to speak. Another man asked why no one seems to be able to help him progress towards ordination. He wrote, "No-one seems to know what to do about this. It wasn't a problem when I went for reader training because I didn't know I had Asperger syndrome. Why is it now a problem? Why will no-one talk to me about it?"

Several people expressed a wish to see more disabled speakers at mainstream Christian conferences. Other people acknowledged that they are struggling to see the positive, and for these people there is a need for churches to stand alongside them in their struggle, and commit to contributing to their spiritual

development. But it is clear to us that there is a treasure-trove of mature Christian spirituality going to waste because churches are unaware of the richness of the spiritual lives of many of their disabled members.

Here are the top ten benefits that people feel their disabilities contribute to their relationship with God:

1. The awareness of physical weakness brings a dependence on God that goes beyond what many others experience. This need for reliance on God leads to deeper levels of faith and trust. One person remarked, “Being less in control means that God is more in control, and that is a joy and a blessing.” “I know that I have to rely on God and other people every step of the way. I can’t do life on my own. This reliance leads to trust, which leads to faith and gives me hope for an eternal future. I don’t know what it will look like but I’m looking forward to it.”

2. Many people find that having a disability opens up the opportunity to share the Gospel, especially with other disabled people. Sometimes this is because they have a greater understanding of their disabled friends and can therefore reach out to them, and sometimes it’s because people notice how well they are coping with life’s problems, and ask them questions which enable them to share a testimony.

3. More than one blind person remarked that they are accustomed to putting their faith in the unseen and this helps them when it comes to putting faith in the invisible God. One went so far as to say she was glad to have been born blind because the first face she will ever see will be Jesus. One guide dog owner said, “Every day I put all my faith in my dog and take leap into the unknown trusting him to keep me safe and there’s a parallel with faith in God.”

4. Several people felt that their disability gives them an empathy and understanding that enables them to draw alongside other people and reach out to them in love.

5. A very common comment was that having a disability (or a disabled child) brought people much closer to God, and although no one used the phrase, many seemed to be describing an experience of “the fellowship of His sufferings”. One person said, “The image of the suffering Christ is a great comfort.” Another wrote, “There is no point in asking 'why me?' but rather 'how can I cope with this with Your help?'”

6. A sense of being accepted “just as I am”. In a world that judges people by the perfection of their bodies, disabled Christians find a great peace in their knowledge and experience of God’s acceptance of them. People say things like, “I’m reminded of His grace and my identity in Him.”

7. For people with learning disabilities, there is a simplicity of trust and faith that should be an example to those whose intellect gets in the way or complicates faith. One mother wrote of her son with Asperger’s Syndrome, “His faith is solid - it is nonsense to him to suggest that the gospel could be untrue.”

8. Some people felt they had more time than others to read the Bible, think, reflect and meditate, and that this had deepened the quality of their relationship with God.

9. Many people felt that they had a greater sensitivity to people and a greater discernment of people’s feelings and needs because of their own experience of disability. One blind person wrote, “I have a deeper understanding of people, I’m very discerning; I see more through my awareness of people because I don’t see with my eyes.”

10. Many disabled people have grappled with the difficult questions of the goodness of God in the face of human suffering. Whereas many Christians go through life avoiding the challenging problems of God’s sovereignty in the face of hardships, disabled people are forced to face this head on. Many could testify how, as a result, they have come through this with their faith in God strengthened and their walk with Him deepened.

**Section B: what one thing do you wish churches knew?**

We received a wide range of responses to this question, covering physical access to the building, attitudes of church members, an acute sense of being discriminated against, neglected and excluded from what ought to be the most welcoming community in the world. Many people felt that churches had no understanding of what it is like to live with a disability or to parent a disabled child, and beyond this, there was a feeling that churches did not really want to know.

There was also a deep longing for genuine friendships, which many disabled people felt was a serious lack in churches, even churches who were quite kind and welcoming on Sundays. One might expect that it would be the lack of physical access or facilities such as large-print hymn books or induction loops that caused

people difficulties. But interestingly, these were not, in the main, what the majority of answers focused on. Most people were far more concerned with the attitudes they encountered and the lack of any real understanding of what their lives are like or what their most pressing needs are.

Someone pointed out that if 1 in 30 of the population has autism, then that goes for your congregation and it should also go for your ministry team. It was sad to see the damaging attitudes that disabled people have encountered. One person wrote "I wish churches knew that sickness and disability are not a sign of sin, so by accommodating disability they are not accommodating sin." What a tragedy, if people are made to feel that their disability is perceived as the result of personal sin.

Several of the respondents indicated that they had stopped going to church because of the barriers and attitudes they encountered. None of these had forsaken their love for Jesus, and many of them were finding fellowship in informal groups or via social media. One couple went to explain to their vicar that they could no longer attend church because of the combination of a lack of wheelchair access and the unreliability of the people on a rota for giving them lifts, and received the reply, "See you around, then."

Here is a summary of the top ten responses received to this question:

1. I wish churches knew how hard and how lonely it is to bring up a child with a disability, that this is not just a "bad day", this is every day. (100% of parents of disabled children who we surveyed gave some version of this answer. Parents really do feel churches don't understand.)

2. A close second to this was: I wish churches were more accepting of people who can't sit quietly, or who make loud interruptions based on their misunderstanding (e.g. that a question in a sermon is rhetorical). If a family have to take their child out, someone should be sure to talk to them and show some care before they leave.

3. Many people said they wish people would stop making unhelpful remarks that trivialise the condition (e.g. "You don't look too bad to me" or "But you cope so well".) Comments of this kind came particularly from people with hidden disabilities such as mental health conditions, and people whose symptoms varied in severity from one day to another, such as those with arthritis, ME or MS. The other

side of this coin is that, as one person put it, “Seeing me as ‘amazing’ or an ‘inspiration’ is patronising and just another way of making me feel I’m different.”

4. Several people said that they want churches to know that their disability is not their only problem in life, and that when they request prayer, people should not assume that the only thing they are praying for is healing from the disability. “Those with disabilities are not necessarily looking or expecting healing (though of course that is sometimes God's plan). God has a powerful plan and purpose for us all, very often, in our weakness.” One disabled pastor wished people would “be more aware of what it is actually like being disabled and not try to ‘pray for healing’ as soon as they are aware of a disability.”

5. There were a few comments about practical access issues such as lack of disabled parking, uncomfortable seating, lack of clear print in service sheets, etc. “I wish churches knew how hard it is for hearing impaired people to do crowds and noisy things (coffee after church / meals with more than 4-5 people).” One person summed up the problem very well: “I wish churches knew that it’s no good to say they don’t need a ramp as they have no disabled members – as long as they have steps no wheelchair users will come!” But there were also comments like, “I wish churches knew that the right attitude is the most important access requirement, ahead of physical things like ramps.”

6. There were a number of differently-expressed comments about the church’s need to follow Jesus in welcoming all. For example: “God's heart of compassion for the weakest members of his flock.” “The church should be an advocate for disabled people as Jesus was.” “The church should evangelise disabled people who are, in many of our communities, a largely unreached people group.” “That the point of Christianity isn’t personal faith and discipleship as much as it is being a holy nation, a royal priesthood. We are to be signs of the kingdom by how we involve all and enable full participation for all.”

7. There were many comments about how unaware churches are of the spiritual contribution that their disabled members can make. “Be more aware of the positive contribution disabled people can make to church life by using their spiritual gifts.” “I wish there was more awareness of the positive contribution disabled people can make to church life. Everyone has something to give & should be encouraged to explore how they can best use their spiritual gifts.” “That disabled people can be gifted, used and called by God just as non-disabled people are.” This even applied

to those whose ability to contribute was not obvious: "I wish churches realised that I can't necessarily meet their expectations because I'm exhausted all the time, but that doesn't mean I don't want to contribute to the life of the church."

8. Our "mantra" in Through the Roof has always been, "don't assume, always ask", and this came out in some of the replies we received. One person wrote, "I forget about my disability unless you ask me about it or there are barriers that mean I can't participate. If I come forward for prayer I have just the same issues as anyone else, do not assume, ask what I need prayer for."

9. Many people felt that they were simply not understood by churches, and that their value as people was overlooked. Comments ranged from simple heart-cries such as "I wish churches knew what it feels like to be disabled, and the restrictions in life", "How to listen to the needs of people with disabilities" and "How isolating it is not to be able to take part in things in the services…There is nothing so isolating as when everyone else is laughing at a visual joke/incident and I can't see it" to the slightly more theological: "The fact that we're all, disabled and non-disabled, created in God's image and redeemed by Christ's atonement means that we're all of incredible, huge, mind-bending value."

10. John Swinton writes about the difference between "inclusion" and "belonging" – the former means that people are friendly towards you on a Sunday, the latter means you would be missed if not there. Many disabled people did not feel they would be missed. We heard tales of people being absent from church through illness, access problems or because they decided to leave, and no one from the church contacted them to see if they were all right. One wrote, "I wish churches knew that keeping contact with church members should be a priority. We can miss a whole month of Sunday services and no-one contacts either of us. Except to send me articles for the parish magazine...."

## Section C: What's the most important thing your church could do for you?

Some churches are doing really well in seeing disabled people as an integral part of their church community. Some, though they may not have given too much thought to things like access and facilities for sight and hearing impaired people, nonetheless have such a welcoming and inclusive attitude that disabled people feel

at home with them even though there may be some practical difficulties. Others might have all the physical things in place – the wheelchair ramps, the accessible toilet – and yet leave disabled people feeling belittled and overlooked.

A church which, even unintentionally, excluded women or people from different ethnic groups, would soon lose members, yet churches regularly exclude disabled people in this way. We long for the day when disabled people are felt to be as essential in the life of the church as any other minority group – for example left-handed or blue-eyed people!

Many people spoke of needing their church to stand with them for the long haul, not just in the moments of crisis. It was felt that, if some church members displayed a lack of understanding, or made remarks that gave offence, much repair work could be done by an apology from the church leadership, accompanied by an assurance that the church distanced itself from this behaviour.

Perhaps the biggest heart-cry under this category was not just to be included on Sundays but to find deep and genuine friendships in their church community. Particularly hurtful was people being "too busy" to help disabled people to participate, or disabled children to make their contribution. One person felt unable to discuss her problems because confidentiality would be breached under the guise of asking people to pray for her.

It was clear that some churches were very welcoming to people with a wide variety of disabilities; yet even these churches had disabled members who could identify some areas where they were not helpful, or some issues that had been overlooked. These could easily have been resolved if the people had spoken up, but many had not felt able to do so, or had been worried about being a nuisance.

It seems one of the best things all churches could do, no matter how inclusive they are, is to have a conversation with their disabled members and other disabled people in their community and ask them if there is anything that they are missing in their provision for them. Many disabled people feel they don't have permission to speak up for themselves. They need to be given permission.

Here are the top ten things disabled people said their church could do for them:

1. The number one issue was the longing for real friendships and not just superficial inclusion. Typical comments were: "They could include us not just on Sundays", "I don't get invited to social events", "My child gets support in Sunday School but no one ever invites her home for a play date" and "Help me to develop genuine relationships in the church, not just Sunday acquaintances."

2. A number of people commented on the lack of equality of opportunity for disabled people in churches, with comments such as "Recognise me as an individual, relax and let me participate as God wants, and not put barriers in my way", "Allow me to be involved in ministry and not just be seen as an object of ministry", "See beyond making sure I can get through the door to valuing me and removing barriers to me serving and leading. E.g. Is the platform accessible to all?" and "I wish they would allow equality in church roles: disabled prayer team, musician, usher, welcome team, elder, Sunday school – everything. We are not represented."

3. Many parents spoke of what churches could do to make life easier for those with disabled children. "Recognise that we are a family, and in a family the children make noises. My autistic child actually can't stay quiet so please don't demand it of her or the family will be unable to attend church." "Don't imply that my child's behaviour is the result of poor parenting. Someone with her disability can't sit still and be quiet. Don't make us feel like an inferior family because of it."

4. A number of people felt that their support needs were not understood or addressed by the church, and that it should be a matter of more than just Sunday. "Let me talk, and not get impatient if all I talk about is autism – sometimes I just need to be able to offload." "Respite schemes, e.g. in the school holidays and carer support – it shouldn't be all about Sunday mornings."

5. Many people found it hard to ask for help, and wanted others to take the initiative and ask them: "They could ask if I need help and not wait for me to request help." "Ask me what my needs are, listen carefully, and don't make every action oh so difficult."

6. There was a simple longing just to be accepted in the way that other people can take for granted in church: "Accept us as people...and share love, friendship and companionship with us in safety, allowing us to encounter all that is wonderful about our faith." "Forget my disability and please never ask, 'How long have you been in a chair?' as the first point of conversation."

7. One issue that came up a number of times was that the structure of church services makes them quite inaccessible for people with learning disabilities: “Shorter sermons, especially for those with learning disabilities.” “Modify the service so it is more inclusive.” Some people extended this to other disabilities, too: “Change Sunday services completely so that they don’t involve reading or any other visual presentation unless they use audio description.”

8. Some churches jump in with great enthusiasm when a new disabled member joins, but the enthusiasm soon wanes. This creates a real problem for disabled church members: “My church are good at ‘crisis intervention’ but I want them to be there for me all the time, through thick and thin.” “Be consistent –people join a rota to do things such as take us to church, and then drop out. Be there for the long haul.”

9. Some churches which managed to accommodate people on Sundays were less thoughtful in other areas of church life: ““My lack of stamina and the side-effects of medication often mean I can’t go out in the evenings. I wish churches could take this into account a bit more as I do miss out on evening events.” “Encourage [my autistic son] to attend a home group (and equip the leaders to support him) - provide a mentor - be accountable.” “Provide accessible transport to meetings or, failing that, have housegroup meetings in my home.”

10. Disabled children need more time and input than other children if they are to participate in church life, but there was a perception that people don’t have the time or can’t be bothered to make the effort. “Give my child the extra time and help he needs to take part in music ministry with the other drummers; I keep being told people are too busy to help him.” “Provide someone to stay with my child in Sunday School so I can listen to the sermon.”

## Section D: What do you wish your church would allow you to do for them?

Many people expressed a wish to do simple things that could easily be arranged (such as Bible readings, manning the sound desk or taking part in the flower rota) but it seems their churches had never thought to provide them with that

opportunity. Many others had great spiritual, organisational or pastoral gifts which were going entirely to waste.

As noted in the first section, many disabled people have been through times of suffering or hardship which have led them into a deep intimacy with and dependence on God, and so have developed a depth of spiritual maturity and wisdom which would amply qualify them for ministry. The small numbers of disabled people in ministry, whether paid or lay ministry is a scandal within the church.

Many people, recognising that those without disabilities may not always appreciate what the issues are, asked only to be allowed to help their churches understand the needs of disabled people. Some asked to be allow to show people that true healing is about God doing the work that He wants to do in the individual, until everyone is complete in Christ – and sometimes that will involve a deeper healing than just the body. As Haydon Spenceley (a wheelchair-using minister with cerebral palsy) said at the Enabling Church conference in June 2014, "It's about salvation, it's not about whether I can do star jumps."

Some people made the point that it's not theological knowledge which fits us for ministry or leadership within the church so much as gifting, character and calling, and many disabled people have these in abundance. Others do not aspire to leadership roles, but nonetheless long to be given the opportunity to befriend and encourage others in the church.

Sadly, one response to this question simply said, "As we do not belong to any church because of previous experiences, the answer is, no." By contrast to this, four people answered this question by saying that their churches were already using their talents to full extent, which was encouraging to hear.

Here are the top ten things disabled people want to be allowed to do for their church:

1. Again, the biggest heart-cry in this category was over all that spiritual gifting going to waste: "Recognise that my disability doesn't mean I'm spiritually impaired. I would love the opportunity to run a housegroup or prayer meeting." "It would be great if some of the large Christian conferences would use people with disabilities on their platforms – we need such role models." "I would like more freedom to serve and use my spiritual gifts, I would like my church to be open to my

abilities rather than worried about my disabilities." "Lead, using the skills I have, instead of making up a list of requirements for leadership that are unfortunately designed to exclude autistic people. God did not make mistakes. He intended autistic people to lead, the same as Nicodemus [who may have had autism] led and followed Jesus."

2. A wish to be able to use practical talents: "Allow me to do the readings in church more often." "Help me to take part in the flower rota." "Let my disabled child do the Bible readings / take part in music ministry." "I could help on the sound desk if they would let me." "I would love to be involved in children's ministry."

3. Some wanted the chance to share their experience of disability with the other members of their churches: "I would like to share my experiences of disability but I have been put off this at times, I think through ignorance or embarrassment." "To have the opportunity to tell my story – it will help with understanding and bless people as well." "Practical sessions as to what it is like to have a visual impairment e.g. using the specially modified pairs of glasses to simulate what it is like to not have full vision." "To educate them and try to help them understand the needs of some people with disabilities." "Help them understand what a broad term disability is. Sometimes a lack of knowledge of how it is to live with a disability is itself a mental disability."

4. Several wanted their children to be given the opportunity to grow their talents within the church, for example by participating in music ministry or on the welcome team. "He used to play in a band for Sunday evening services, but the youth leaders with musical ability have left and are not being replaced."

5. Some wanted to be involved in the church's wider ministry, not just on Sundays, and not just to disabled people: "Let me offer some counselling or support through the church, not just to disabled people." "I have time to listen, most of them don't."

6. There were those who wanted, out of their experience of disability, to contribute to and expand the church's understanding of salvation: "Let me show them that healing isn't about functionality or lack of it, but that it is about God doing the work that only he can do and bringing people to his salvation." "A realisation that there is more to God's love than just the "sinner's prayer"/born again aspects. Life isn't that simple and Jesus's teaching of the Kingdom of God was much richer."

7. Others felt they had something to offer in terms of showing people how to accept themselves the way God accepts them – something they had learned through their experience of disability: “Share something of the joy of being comfortable with not being perfect and of seeing God’s image in others.” “Let us share experiences to help others be accepted.”

8. Some felt they could play a role in making a link between the church and disability groups in the community. (As Through the Roof is looking appoint disability champions in 1,000 churches, this could also form part of this role.) Others felt they could play a role in fundraising.

9. Some people simply wanted the opportunity to be more real and open with their fellow church members. One wrote, “I would love to be open about my eating disorder, but dare not because of trite reactions, trotting out of Bible verses which are nearly always out of context, and breaking of confidence in a prayer setting.” It was clear that behind responses like this lay again that profound longing for genuine, reciprocal friendships which so many disabled people found lacking in churches.

10. Although it was expressed in a variety of ways, many people wanted to see a willingness to learn from one another informally, as well as through formal ministry settings. One person expressed this as, “They tend to just write me off and say God can't use me. Not true. Be a friend.” Another wrote in greater detail: “To show that faith is about more than knowledge and wisdom, that we shouldn’t have a hierarchy of Christians where the ones who know the most or can spout the most theology are the ones who we look up to the most. We can all learn a lot from each other.”